




## Did Jacob Lie? Were His Words Inspired? Examining Genesis 27 in Light of Augustine, Aquinas, and Lombardo

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### Abstract

In Genesis 27 Jacob is depicted as lying to Isaac. Jacob, however, was held in Christian tradition to be both a moral exemplar and to be speaking prophetically in this episode with his father. This raises the question of how Doctors of the Church such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were able reconcile these interpretive commitments with their stance on the intrinsically disordered nature of lying. In examining their resolution of this tension, we discover an important exegetical distinction for interpreting troubling words as nevertheless being divinely inspired. Yet, it is only in light of another interpretive distinction, recently highlighted by Nicholas Lombardo OP, that we can both hold to the inspired nature of Jacob's words and also a natural reading of the account in Genesis 27. The detailed examination of Genesis 27 by both Augustine and Aquinas is an important case study for understanding how we can interpret troubling language as still being the word of God. This undertaking, spanning centuries between Augustine and Aquinas, is now taken one step further thanks to the exegetical proposal of Fr. Lombardo.

### Keywords

inspiration, lying, interpretation, exegesis

Genesis 27<sup>1</sup> gives the following account of what preceded Jacob obtaining the blessing intended by Isaac for Esau:

[Rebekah addressing Jacob:] Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you . . . that he [Isaac] may bless you before he dies'. But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, 'Look, my brother Esau is a hairy

<sup>1</sup> A note of thanks must be extended to John Skalko, who first introduced me to the texts of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas on lying, which are heavily relied upon in the following analysis.

man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing'. His mother said to him, 'Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word . . . (27:8-13 Anglicized NRSV).

Later, we arrive at the moment when Jacob puts his mother's plan into action: 'So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me"' (27:18-19). Hesitant, Isaac asks once again about the identity of the son he has before him: 'He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am"' (27:24-26).

There are various explicit features to Rebekah's plan, not all detailed above. These include disguising Jacob's smooth skin with the hairy skin of two kids<sup>2</sup> (27:16), disguising Jacob's scent and perhaps shape with Esau's garments (27:15), and having Jacob present to Isaac a meal he was expecting from Esau (27:14,17). All these can fairly be described as ordered towards deceiving Isaac into believing that Jacob is Esau. One aspect of Rebekah's plan that is either implicit in the account we have in Genesis or a unique contribution by Jacob is the verbal assertion that he is Esau: 'I am Esau your firstborn' (27:18). Again, when asked by Isaac 'Are you really my son Esau?' Jacob answers 'I am' (27:26). While this latter feature of the account is perhaps no more nor less deceptive than the others, it is the part of the account we will be focusing on, the part of the account which can most plausibly be described as lying.

### Did Jacob Lie, and Why is it a Problem?

Jacob's assertion that he is Esau is, to most minds, a straightforward example of a lie. There is, however, some nuance to what we should define as lying. For example, we should keep in mind the distinction between deliberately and unknowingly asserting what is false. I could assert that a particular event began at 12:30 pm but be mistaken. Conversely, I could have in mind that the event did indeed begin at 12:45 pm but assert to someone that it began at 12:30 pm. The former is a 'mistake' and not necessarily a moral matter. The latter, however, is more properly a lie and presents a moral question because the person

<sup>2</sup> Whilst the skin from one kid could possibly be sufficient to cover Jacob's hands and neck, the Hebrew word used to refer to the two kids to be fetched by Jacob, the plural noun *gə-dā-yê*, occurs only twice in Genesis. The second appearance is in 27:16, when reference is made to the skins used to cover Jacob's smooth skin. It seems noteworthy that the skin of both kids were used in the plan, rather than only the meat. See 'gə-dā-yê,' *Englishman's Concordance, Bible Hub*, n.p. <[https://biblehub.com/hebrew/gedayei\\_1423.htm](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/gedayei_1423.htm)> [cited 4 Dec. 2021].

consciously, engaging their will and intellect, asserted as true what they knew was false. With this in mind, we can appreciate how St. Thomas Aquinas describes lying: ‘to signify by words something that is not in [our] mind’.<sup>3</sup>

In light of the deliberation Jacob was engaged in with Rebekah and there being no indication in the passage that Jacob was in some altered mental state, the expression ‘I am Esau your firstborn’ is not merely a mistake but a lie. Jacob is signifying ‘by words something that is not in his mind’, and more than once. The problem this presents to a believer is twofold.

Firstly, Christian tradition holds patriarchs such as Jacob to be moral exemplars. For example, St. Augustine, in *On Lying*, describes Jacob and others as ‘persons one would not dare to blame’<sup>4</sup> and St. Thomas approvingly quotes St. Augustine in reference to Jacob: ‘In Holy Writ, as Augustine observes (*Lib. De Mend.* v), the deeds of certain persons are related as examples of perfect virtue . . .’.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, if he is engaging in morally unbecoming behavior, there is a tension to be resolved between this interpretive tradition and the words of Scripture.

In second place, and more seriously, Christian tradition also holds that these words of Jacob were inspired by God. Consider that St. John Chrysostom, in *Homily 53 on Genesis*, says in reference to Jacob’s interaction with Isaac: ‘consider that God wanted his prediction to take effect and so arranged everything to happen this way’.<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom goes on to assert, in reference to the same episode: ‘For you realize that grace from on high was cooperating in the good man’s deception’.<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine in *On Lying*, in reference to Jacob and in the context of discussing Jacob’s words in Genesis 27, asserts: ‘it must be believed that those men mentioned as worthy of authority in the times of the Prophets did and said in prophetic spirit all that is related of them’.<sup>8</sup> Finally, consider what St. Thomas says in reference to Jacob’s words in Genesis 27: ‘he made use of this mode of speech being moved by the spirit of prophecy’.<sup>9</sup> This second interpretive commitment of some Fathers and Doctors of the Church, however, seems to imply that God inspired a lie.

<sup>3</sup> *STh* II-II, q. 110, a. 3, c.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church - Volume 16 - Saint Augustine: Treaties on Various Subjects* (trans. Sister Mary Sarah Muldowney, R.S.M., Harold B. Jaffee, Sister Mary Francis McDonald, O.P., Sister Luanne Meagher, O.S.B., Sister M. Clement Eagan, C.C.U.I., and Mary E. DeFerrari; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 60.

<sup>5</sup> *STh* II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad. 3. Note also the tone and title of St. Ambrose’s *Jacob and the Happy Life*.

<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom, Saint John, *The Fathers of the Church – Homilies on Genesis 46-67* (trans. Robert C. Hill; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 84.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, 88.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> *STh* II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad. 3.

In summary, Jacob's words to Isaac, 'I am Esau your firstborn', fit the description of lying and lying is, according to reason and revelation,<sup>10</sup> morally wrong. Yet, Christian tradition holds these words to have been uttered by a moral exemplar and inspired by God. How is this tension resolved?

### First Option: Perhaps Lying Is Not Always Sinful?

One possible resolution to these tensions would be if the negative precept against lying allowed for some exception. That is, if it was not *always* sinful. This very question, with the case of Jacob and Isaac in mind, is addressed by St. Thomas in *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 110, a. 3: 'Whether every lie is a sin?' The short answer is yes, every lie is a sin. The reason is, 'a lie is evil in respect of its genus, since it is an action bearing on undue matter. For as words are naturally signs of intellectual acts, it is unnatural and undue for anyone to signify by words something that is not in his mind'.<sup>11</sup>

To understand St. Thomas's reasoning, we must understand his anthropology. The nature of an action is contingent on the nature of its agent, placing anthropology 'upstream' from morality. Now, as rational and social creatures, we are ordered towards not only an individual end or 'good', but a social common good.<sup>12</sup> The full life of a human person is in communion with others. We see this manifest itself at the very start of life; not only do newborns need a community of persons to care for them physically, but a young person's rational capacities require a community within which to unfold.<sup>13</sup> We only reach our full humanity through other persons and one of the essential abilities we have in order to establish, sustain, and perfect such a community of rational creatures is to communicate our rational thoughts.

In light of this ordering of human nature towards community and the essential role that communication plays in such a community, we

<sup>10</sup> Regarding revelation, note the examples provided by St. Augustine in *On Lying*: 'in the Decalogue itself it is written "Thou shalt not bear false witness", in which classification every lie is embraced . . . "The mouth that belieth, killeth the soul" . . . "Thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie" . . . [Christ's own words:] "Let your speech be 'Yes, Yes;' 'No, No;' and whatever is more comes from the evil one" . . . [And St. Paul:] "Wherefore, put away lying and speak the truth"'. Additionally, St. Thomas uses Ecclesiasticus 7:14 as the *Sed Contra* in an article on lying in the *Summa Theologiae*: 'Be not willing to make any manner of lie' (*STh* II-II, q. 110, a. 3).

<sup>11</sup> *STh* II-II, q. 110, a. 3, c.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding this detail of the common good within Thomistic anthropology and its relation to St. Thomas's account of lying see Skalko, John, *Disordered Actions: A Moral Analysis of Lying and Homosexual Activity* (Germany: Editiones Scholasticae, 2019), 296.

<sup>13</sup> As my former ethics professor, Paul McNellis SJ, would note, anyone alive today is alive because a community of others have said 'yes' to their existence and flourishing.

can see that our ability to communicate rational thought is ordered towards this complete good, this common good, of the human person. This helps us understand St. Thomas's words: 'it is *unnatural and undue* for anyone to signify by words something that is not in his mind'. It is *unnatural* because it is oriented *away* from the good of the human community, which coincides with the good of the individual.

St. Thomas is not the only Doctor of the Church to assert that lying is by definition immoral. In his own treatment of the question he calls on the authority of St. Augustine: 'every lie is a sin'.<sup>14</sup> Yet, if these two Doctors of the Church agree that lying is intrinsically wrong,<sup>15</sup> how then do they make sense of Jacob's words in Genesis 27?

### Second Option: Perhaps Jacob Did Not Lie?

St. Augustine has two significant treatises on lying, both quoted by St. Thomas in his own treatment of lying in the *Summa Theologiae*. In both *On Lying*, from around 395 AD,<sup>16</sup> and *Against Lying*, from around 420 AD,<sup>17</sup> St. Augustine confronts the tension we highlighted at the start, i.e., between Jacob's words and the tradition's interpretive commitments of holding him to be a moral role model and holding his words to be inspired.

St. Augustine's resolution to this tension is to identify a distinction regarding the manner in which words can signify, by which Jacob's words need not be characterized as a lie:

[O]n attentive and faithful observation it becomes apparent that what Jacob did at his mother's bidding, in seeming to deceive his father, is not a lie but a mystery. If we call it a lie, then all parables and figures for signifying anything which are not to be taken literally, but in which one thing must be understood for another, will be called lies. A deplorable consequence!<sup>18</sup>

As St. Augustine goes on to explain with examples, figurative or metaphorical language is not lying. If I call Christ a 'rock' or a 'lion',<sup>19</sup> an uneducated hearer may presume I am lying or confused, but I am actually affirming something true *through* figurative language and in imitation of Sacred Scripture.

<sup>14</sup> *STh* II-II, q.110, a. 3, c.

<sup>15</sup> Which is not to say that every lie is gravely sinful. See *STh* II-II, q. 110, a.4. And note that in the *Sed Contra* of the article St. Augustine is quoted as asserting that some lies are not grievously sinful. Both Doctors agree that while lying is always sinful, it is not always grievously sinful.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 116.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Consider the phrase ‘I am Esau your firstborn’. If we take ‘I’ to mean Jacob, an individual person, and ‘Esau your firstborn’ to refer to a distinct individual, then we would have a lie. If, however, we consider ‘I’ to refer not simply to Jacob the individual, but Jacob as a figure of Christ’s body the Church,<sup>20</sup> with the goat skins on his body standing for the sins of others on Him ‘who carried not His own sins but those of others’,<sup>21</sup> then we have not a lie but a truth communicated through figures. As St. Augustine notes: ‘When the things signified are true, at least in some past, present, or future sense, without doubt it is a true signification and not a lie’.<sup>22</sup> Without attempting to flush-out every detail of how the figurative language applies, we can recognize a certain brilliance to St. Augustine’s distinction. If a phrase can be taken figuratively to communicate something true, then it cannot simply be called a lie, but can be characterized as being true, as when we affirm that Christ is a ‘rock’ or a ‘lion’.

Notice that for St. Augustine the tradition’s commitment to Jacob having spoken prophetically in this encounter does not create a further tension between his apparent falsehood and his consideration as a role model, but resolves it. It is because Jacob is inspired and speaking prophetically that his words can take-on a figurative meaning regarding Christ and the Church and, thus, be characterized as true. Another Doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, concurs with St. Augustine on the role of prophecy in resolving the aforementioned tension:

If, however, any of their statements appear to be untruthful, we must understand such statements to have been figurative and *prophetic*. . . . Jacob’s assertion that he was Esau, Isaac’s firstborn, was spoken in a mystical sense, because, to wit, the latter’s birthright was due to him by right: and he made use of this mode of speech being *moved by the spirit of prophecy, in order to signify a mystery*, namely, that the younger people, i.e. the Gentiles, should supplant the first-born, i.e. the Jews.<sup>23</sup>

St. Augustine also gives good reasons for why God would inspire words that are to be taken figuratively in such a confusing context. He notes that:

[These] things are veiled in figures, in garments as it were, in order that they may *exercise the mind of the pious inquirer*, and *not become cheap* for being bare and obvious . . . A student is not hindered because they are shrouded in this way. On the contrary, they are rendered more acceptable: for being remote they are *more ardently desired*, and for being desired they are *more joyfully discovered*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Id., 155.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *STh II-II*, q. 110, a. 3, ad. 3. Italics are my own.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 154. Italics are my own.

From Augustine's text we can identify three divine motivations for God speaking truth in this confusing manner. Firstly, it exercises 'the mind of the pious inquirer', that is, it has the believer keep God's word in mind and makes him engage in theology - 'faith seeking understanding'. Second, it protects these divine truths from becoming 'cheap'. This corresponds with the thought of St. Thomas who speaks of certain metaphors in Scripture keeping divine truths 'better hidden from the unworthy'<sup>25</sup> and notes, in concurrence with both points: 'The very hiding of truth in figures [within Sacred Scripture] is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds and as a defense against the ridicule of the impious, according to the words "Give not that which is holy to dogs"' (Matthew 7:6).<sup>26</sup> Lastly, the discovery of these truths after much theologizing and effort increases our desire for these divine mysteries and, consequently, we experience even greater joy in knowing them. We should also note that both St. Thomas and St. Augustine held that 'those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly'.<sup>27</sup>

### Second Option Reexamined

Within St. Thomas's treatment of both lying and Jacob's words to Isaac, he also makes reference to Judith lying to Holofernes. Judith, he notes, seems to have been commended for lying (Judith 15:10, 11). St. Thomas clarifies that Judith is commended 'not for lying to Holofernes, but for her desire to save the people, to which end she exposed herself to danger'.<sup>28</sup> That is, she is commended for the good *intentions* prompting her actions, not the actions themselves. In this case, as opposed to Jacob's, the apparent lie is identified as truly being a lie. Perhaps this is because Jacob, unlike Judith, was speaking prophetically. For it is through the prophetic nature of Jacob's words that they take on a figurative and true meaning. Yet, St. Thomas goes on to note, concerning Judith: 'And yet we might also say that her words contain truth in some mystical sense'.<sup>29</sup> In a parallel manner, St. Augustine, in his earlier treatment of lying and Jacob's words to Isaac, treats of the midwives who lied to Pharaoh in order to save the Hebrew children and notes that '[We] cannot say that these women announced one thing to the Pharaoh [sic.] in place of another in prophetic spirit to signify a truth about to be

<sup>25</sup> *STh* I, q. 1, a. 9, ad. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, ad. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* And Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 154: 'Those things are veiled in figures . . . Although we have learned their meaning stated openly and plainly in other places . . .'

<sup>28</sup> *STh* II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad. 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

revealed, even though, *without their realization, their words signified something accomplished through them . . .*<sup>30</sup>

In both St. Thomas's treatment of Judith and St. Augustine's treatment of the Egyptian midwives we have (a) something appearing to be a lie being identified as such and yet (b) some allusion to the idea that the words of the lie have a true and mystical meaning. If they do have some true and mystical meaning, however, they would seem to take on such a meaning when considered as words inspired by God. Consequently, it seems that we could hold that Judith and the midwives simultaneously: (1) spoke prophetically, (2) were unaware of this, and (3) lied. Note, however, that the second factor, being unaware of speaking prophetically, is what allows us to affirm that their words are a lie. If they did not know that they were speaking prophetically, this implies that they had no idea what the true mystical meaning of the words were and, as a consequence, signified 'by words something that is not in [their] mind',<sup>31</sup> i.e., they lied according to St. Thomas's definition.

Returning to Jacob, what indication do we have that he was aware of the mystical meaning of his words? None, from my own reading of the text. Yet, it would seem that St. Thomas and St. Augustine held that he was aware of the mystical and true meaning of his words in light of: (a) their commitment to his being a moral role model, (b) their identification of lying as being always and everywhere immoral, and (c) the distinctive treatment they give the lies of Judith and the Egyptian midwives. Therefore, the Augustinian-Thomistic account of Jacob's words presupposes an awareness on Jacob's part of his speaking prophetically. Yet, even if we grant this, would Jacob not still be morally culpable for deceiving his father?

If Jacob did have the mystical truth of his words in mind, he must have also known that his father would have been deceived by those figuratively true words. While this is true, deception can simply be a consequence of hiding the truth, which, unlike lying, is not always and everywhere immoral. Both St. Thomas and St. Augustine hold that the truth may, at times, have to be hidden.<sup>32</sup> The issue is that lying is not a

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 62. Italics are my own.

<sup>31</sup> *STh II-II*, q. 110, a. 3, c.

<sup>32</sup> 'But, concealing the truth is not the same as putting forth a lie. Although everyone who lies wants to conceal the truth, not everyone who wants to conceal the truth lies. Generally, we conceal the truth not by lying but by keeping quiet', Augustine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 151. In St. Thomas, we note how he excuses Abraham calling Sarah his sister, not because he meant these words in some mystical sense, but because he was equivocating, i.e. affirming something true even though such an affirmation would be misunderstood by the hearer: 'As to Abraham "when he said that Sara was his sister, he wished to hide the truth, not to tell a lie, for she is called his sister since she was the daughter of his father"', Augustine says (*QQ. Super. Gen.* xxvi; *Contra Mend.* x; *Contra Faust.* xxii). Wherefore Abraham himself said (Gn. 20:12): "She is truly my sister, the daughter of my father's side". (*STh II-II*, q. 110, a. 3, ad. 3).



morally permissible means to this end, even if seemingly the most efficient, because it is an intrinsically disordered action. Consequently, as long as Jacob did have the mystical meaning in mind when he spoke his words to Isaac, this does not undermine his being a moral role model.

If, however, he did *not* have the mystical, figurative, and true meaning of his words in mind when he spoke - as seems to be the case with Judith, the Egyptian midwives, and, more clearly, Caiphias the high priest when he said, regarding Our Lord, 'it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (Jn. 11:50)<sup>33</sup> - then Jacob, we must say, lied. For Jacob's words would then fulfill St. Thomas' definition of a lie: 'to signify by words something that is not in [our] mind'.

To my mind, it is the interpretive commitment to Jacob being an ideal role-model that motivates St. Augustine and St. Thomas to hold that he was aware of the figurative and mystical meaning of his words when he spoke them to Isaac, despite the absence of any indication of this in the text.<sup>34</sup> Today, however, the Church no longer seems committed to this interpretive framework. We can still hold Jacob to be a role-model in many ways, but we no longer seem committed to the idea that his deeds are morally impeccable. In fact, the story of Jacob is a more compelling moral narrative when we recognize the fault in his actions. Note how he used two kids and a garment to deceive his father and, later, when he was a father, he was deceived into thinking his son Joseph was dead by means of a garment and the blood of a kid (Gen. 37:31-33).<sup>35</sup> Even before this, we see another parallel wherein Jacob, having poor eyesight due to the darkness of the night - just as Isaac did due to old age - has one sibling switched for another, as Isaac suffered, when he is given Leah as a wife instead of Rachel (Gen. 29:21-25).<sup>36</sup> It would seem that the most natural reading of the Jacob story is one where the reader is supposed to recognize that Jacob should not have been grasping for the birthright due to him, but should have trusted that God would bring this about. Just as with Judith, Jacob may be commended for his intentions, but not the means chosen for his end.

Holding on to the interpretive commitment that Jacob's words were inspired, as evidenced by their fulfillment in Christ and His Church, but

<sup>33</sup> The passage continues: 'He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God' (Jn. 11:51-53).

<sup>34</sup> It should, nonetheless, be granted to them that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

<sup>35</sup> See Akin, Jimmy, 'Was It Okay for Jacob to Lie to His Father?', *The National Catholic Register*, n.p. <<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/was-it-okay-for-jacob-to-lie-to-his-father>> [cited 7 Dec. 2021]. See also Crotty, OP., Terence, 'Joseph', *The Pentateuch and Historical Books*, [Unpublished Notes] (N. 13, November 26th, 2021), 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> See Crotty, OP., Terence, 'The Jacob Cycle', *The Pentateuch and Historical*, [Unpublished Notes] (N. 12, November 19th, 2021), 4.

also recognizing that the natural reading of the text does not indicate that he had in mind the figurative truth of his words or any idea that his words contained some figurative truth,<sup>37</sup> we can now attempt a more nuanced solution to the tension between Jacob's lie and God's inspiration of these words.

### Third Option: Jacob Lied, God Did Not

Nicholas Lombardo OP. has recently put forward an exegetical distinction which, like St. Augustine's distinction between words taken in a figurative or non-figurative manner, helps us make sense of Jacob's words as 'words of God'. The distinction, which is borrowed from Gottlob Frege, is between the 'sense' and 'reference' words have.<sup>38</sup> For example, when I was living on the Island of Tortola I could say the phrase 'I'm back on the rock' and people would take these words to *refer to*, i.e., mean, that I was back on Tortola from a trip. In another context, and likely spoken over the phone, the phrase could mean that I am back on the large boulder not too far from my house on Tortola where I could look out at the sea. It could also mean that I have returned to Christ, 'my God, my rock in whom I take refuge' (Ps. 18:2). Lastly, this phrase, 'I'm back on the rock', could refer to someone who has relapsed into an addiction to crack-cocaine, which is called 'rock'.

The 'sense' the words have, i.e., their place within a linguistic system, does not change. What changes in each case is their reference, i.e., how the sense of the words 'latch on to the world'.<sup>39</sup> Words, and their combinations, are in potency towards many different meanings.<sup>40</sup> Which 'reference' or meaning is at play is partially revealed by context, but ultimately depends on the intention of the author or speaker.

With this distinction in mind, we can recognize with greater clarity that 'I am Esau your firstborn', while only having one 'sense' as defined by the rules of language, can simultaneously have two different

<sup>37</sup> For if he was inspired in such a manner to not know the particular content of the true meaning of his words, but only to know that they were in some sense true in a figurative manner, then he would not necessarily have been lying because he had in mind that the words were true on God's authority, even if not conscious of exactly how they were true. We do not have space here to flush-out the implications of this particular circumstance. The text, however, does not imply this to be the case either, thus we put it aside for our current purposes.

<sup>38</sup> Lombardo, OP, Nicholas E., 'A Voice Like the Sound of Many Waters: Inspiration, Authorial Intention, and Theological Exegesis', *Nova et Vetera*, Volume 19, Number 3, (2021), 825-869.

<sup>39</sup> Lombardo, 'Inspiration, Authorial Intention, and Theological Exegesis', 835.

<sup>40</sup> Consider the difference between a word as listed in the dictionary versus when used in context. The latter has become more specified toward one or other of its initially possible meanings. This point was highlighted for me by Rinon, Yoav, 'The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida I: Plato's Pharmacy', *The Review of Metaphysics*, Volume 46, Number 2 (1992), 369-386.

‘references’ or meanings as derived from the distinct intentions of God and Jacob. As Lombardo explains in a similar case to Jacob’s, that of Caiphas’s words in the Gospel of John:

Caiphas declares, ‘It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish’. Afterward, the evangelist comments: ‘He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied . . .’. (John 11:49-52). The clear implication is that, on account of his office, Caiphas was speaking under God’s influence, and that, ironically, *his words were true but not for the reason that he thought*.<sup>41</sup>

We can say the same of Jacob, his words were true, but not for any reason that he had in mind. Lombardo goes on:

*... Caiphas and God each intend the same sense, but they do not intend the same reference.* The evangelist does not draw any implications for scriptural inspiration from his narrative, but we can: the story and the evangelist’s commentary - each of which themselves Christians hold to be inspired by God - strongly suggest that God can use the words of Scripture to convey meanings that are different from, or *even opposed to, the meanings intended by the inspired writers*.<sup>42</sup>

Lombardo goes on to make the case that this exegetical possibility, i.e. that ‘God sometimes intended less than the human authors’,<sup>43</sup> was canonized in the New Testament account of Peter and Paul deciding that Jewish converts were free from observing the Mosaic law, despite the fact that the authors of this law seem to clearly intend for such laws to bind in perpetuity.<sup>44</sup>

That God intends more meanings to the words He inspires than do the human authors is uncontroversial. Such is the case when we recognize ‘that the Jewish Scriptures testified to Jesus of Nazareth, often in ways that the inspired writers could not have foreseen’.<sup>45</sup> The less obvious case that Lombardo is able to highlight through the distinction between ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ is when God intends less than the inspired author. And such, I believe, is the case of Jacob.

## Conclusion

Insofar as God inspired the words ‘I am Esau your firstborn’, he intended a figurative and true reference, as identified by St. Augustine

<sup>41</sup> Lombardo OP, ‘Inspiration, Authorial Intention, and Theological Exegesis’, 851-852. Italics are my own.

<sup>42</sup> Id., 852. Italics are my own.

<sup>43</sup> Id., 864.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

and St. Thomas. Yet, Jacob, while using the exact same words, intended a 'reference' that did not correspond to reality. With the same word, 'I', God was referring - through Jacob as a figure - to Christ, while Jacob was referring to himself as an individual and, as a consequence, lying. In this inspired phrase God intended *less* than Jacob, insofar as he did not intend Jacob's reference to himself simply as an individual, and also *more*, insofar as God intended these words to refer to both Christ and His Church. Through one and the same phrase, with one and the same 'sense', Jacob lied and God did not. In the end, the case of Jacob's words to Isaac highlights what is poetically captured in the old Portuguese adage: 'God writes straight with crooked lines'.

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